

Advent 3 B 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 13, 2020

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Do you remember the story of the burning bush? How Moses is out in the wilderness, and he comes across a burning bush. It's on fire, but it doesn't burn up. It's one of the most important stories in the whole Bible. God is in that bush, and God tells Moses that he, Moses, is going to lead the Hebrews out of slavery and into freedom. And Moses asks God for his name. And then, in the most profound and most discussed line in the Bible, God responds, "I am who I am." It's much discussed. I am who I am. I will be who I will be. The Greek philosophers thought the answer was "I am pure being." It's four consonants, which we commonly transliterate as *Yahweh*. *Jehovah*. But most simply, "I am."

It should also be pointed out that it's not exactly an answer to Moses' question about a name. It's sort of saying that I am too big for a name. Quit asking me stupid questions, Moses. I just am, and I am with you, and you'll learn the rest as we go.

The author of the fourth gospel, John's gospel, is commonly thought to be John the Apostle, the brother of James. There are two Johns in today's sermon. John the gospel writer, aka John the Evangelist, and John the Baptist. Anyway, the Gospel writer sees that story of the burning bush as the key to Jesus. Who is "I am." And you, I bet, know most or all of the seven "I am" names that Jesus gives himself throughout the fourth gospel. *I am the good shepherd*. *I am the bread of life*. *I am the light of the world*. *I am the vine, you are the branches*. *I am the gate*. *I am the resurrection and the life*. *I am the way, and the truth, and the life*. Some of the most beloved sayings in the Bible. Embroidered on pillows, engraved on plaques, memorized by children. *I am*.

And that all comes from Exodus. Because in the fourth gospel, when they come to arrest Jesus, in the passion according to John, they tell him that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, and he replies, *I am*. And all the soldiers fall to the ground. *I am* contains the fullness of the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The burning bush. The God who led the people through the Red Sea. *I am*. So in the fourth gospel, according to John the Evangelist, Jesus is the fullness of God. Seven names, because seven is a number of fullness and perfection. *I am*. It's a big deal in John's gospel. The key to knowing Jesus, and knowing who he is for you.

So it's a big deal, actually, in our gospel reading today when John the Baptizer says, "I am

not.” That wouldn’t be an unusual thing in any other book, in any other context. *He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” I am not. [There is] one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.* It’s the great “I am not.” It wouldn’t be unusual, except that it’s repeated in today’s reading. *I am not. I am not. No.* And it’s in the context of this gospel, where Jesus says, “I am” in a very meaningful way over twenty times.

The writer of the gospel announces “This is the testimony of John.” *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light... This is the testimony given by John.* Witness, testify, testify, testimony. John has something important to say about Jesus. It starts with this: *I am not.*

You and I are not much like the John the Baptist. So far, I don’t know anyone who has showed up at a church pot luck with locusts and honey. But I think we can adopt John’s testimony, “I am not.” I am not the Messiah, I am not God. I often hear people talk about “the reason for the season.” They mean that the birth of Jesus is the reason for Christmas. All of the other stuff is secondary. Jesus is the reason for the season. But in addition to all of that other stuff– shopping, parties, decorations, social pressure, overindulging in food and drink– in addition to all of that other stuff not being the reason for the season, YOU are not the reason for the season. I am not the reason for the season. I am not. Not even your kids and your grand-kids, your most cherished loved ones, the reason for the season. We can learn that from John the Baptist. Who will say later in this gospel’s chapter three, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

I don’t know how the Covid pandemic is affecting your observance of Christmas. You may be cutting back and doing much less. And for some, that’s a huge disappointment. For a few, that can be a relief. Or you may be feeling pressure to keep up with others, to keep up with the expectations of past holidays, to *deliver* a good Christmas. And that pressure may be causing you to expose yourself and others to greater risk of Covid infection. Christmas is annually I time when I feel like I don’t live up to expectations. And this year, with all of the limits, I really can’t live up to expectations imposed by others, or imposed internally by my own self. But listen to John the Baptizer today: *I am not the Messiah. I am not. No.* I don’t have to deliver Christmas. Mary had to deliver a baby in a barnyard. Not me. Joseph had to haul his young wife and their newborn child to Egypt. Not me. I don’t have to deliver. Because God delivers.

With Christmas just twelve days away, it’s good to get a little holiday reminder from the Gospel according to John. The gospel where Jesus says over and over and over: I am, I am, I am, I am, I am, I am, I am. And with John the Baptizer, we get to say, I am not. That’s the truth. That’s the reason for the season. And actually, when you think about it, that is truly good news. I am not. Amen.